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ABSTRACT

Forty-three percent of California school districts with one or more high schools have some sort of student representation on the board of education. Some observers have said that students act like adult board members, but that their interests at the beginning of each year make everyone keenly aware that they are students. In California, student representation is developing in many different ways. There is a bill before the legislature that would require each school district with one or more high schools to include one student as a nonvoting member of the school board. The bill would also allow the district's high school pupils to choose the student member. A student is now selected annually to sit in a nonvoting capacity with the ten-member California State Board of Education. And the Board of Regents of the University of California has recently established one seat for a student regent, who will have a full vote and be selected by his peers. In almost every case, school boards that have student representatives sing the praises of student representation. No other learning experience can provide the know-how that comes with involvement. Both boards and students benefit when school boards provide for such involvement. (Author/JG)

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STUDENT REPRESENTATIVES SERVING WITH BOARDS OF EDUCATION

by Daniel L. Towler

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A. BACKGROUND

At last count there were 1173 school districts in California. During the past school year, 43% of the boards of education of those school districts having one or more high schools had some form of student representation serving with boards of education.

For the past two years I have served as President of the Board of Education of the Los Angeles County Schools. Our office serves 95 school districts consisting of approximately 1,800,000 students. I have also served as Chairman of the California School Boards Association's Committee on Minority Education and Student Needs.

During this period, I have been both astonished and gratified at the growth and expansion in the number of boards with student representatives. It is even more exciting to note that almost all of this activity has taken place since 1970.

What has brought about such a new and almost spontaneous wave of interest in student participation? When you analyze it, everything that happens in our society has some kind of effect on our schools. The pressures, the concerns, the achievements, the disappointments--all have their impact. All must be responded to. Some parents and citizens want the schools to say "no" more frequently; others want schools to remain as they are and always have been; and still others want the schools to move faster in reacting to the current needs of our youth. We must decide: shall our schools become catalysts for social change, or defenders of the status quo?

In a number of school districts the decision has been made on the presupposition that "our students are the reason our school system exists." Therefore, they must not be considered merely as objects to be educated.

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They are participants. They must have a part in the shaping of their schools. And schools, if they are to help bridge the everwidening gap between schools and students, must respond to the growing numbers of concerned students asking for school programs and activities that are honestly and meaningfully related to the real world around them.

We are confronted today with a generation that isn't going to conform to all of the traditional values of our adult society. We are being challenged by value conflicts and youthful experimentation in many areas--in communication and in human relationships, in the political and in the physical environment, as well as in the personal realm where young people want to know "who am I? what am I doing? and where am I going?" The answers to concerns such as these can best come when board members, administrators, teachers, parents and students, are involved and participating.

Most school districts operate on the philosophical premise that everyone can and must be heard; that solutions can be reached that everyone can live with. We accept the idea that the process of renewal in our schools is a continuing one. That process, however, must be orderly and must be directed toward improving opportunities for learning.

Student unrest, in one form or another, is characteristic of almost every school these days. In most school districts with student representatives, however, boards of education, administrators, teachers and students have demonstrated considerable wisdom in facing the issues with constructive attitudes and in working out satisfactory solutions. Reports from such school districts indicate that students with a variety of diverse and constructive opinions have been able to participate effectively in the educational program. They have all learned to listen to one another. Board members and members of the staff have also been positively affected by the participation of student

representatives in the school districts I have contacted--there seems to be an increased awareness that we're living in a world where it's all right to be different.

B. ORGANIZATION AND FUNCTION

Student representation takes many forms--from a student or students who meet with the board of education in a consulting or reactive role, to full-blown student advisory boards with elective officers. However they're organized, it is interesting to see the kinds of things they do.

Some obervers have said that they really act like adult board members--and they do But their interests at the beginning of each year make us keenly aware of the fact that they are students. For example, one of the perennial items on their agendas is always food: Why are there egg shells in the egg salad sandwiches? Why isn't the food packaged in recycleable materials? Or why isn't the need for concessionaire food sales evaluated more carefully?

Differences between schools within the district is usually next on the agenda, and generally results in more uniform regulations for "open" and "closed" campuses--regulations which are often better put together than those which the administration would have come up with on its own. Students are also concerned about traffic patterns and about relations with shopkeepers who do business close to school campuses. And, as you might expect, dress and grooming standards come in for their share of attention. Other areas of concern that have received thoughtful consideration include:

- the distribution of literature and other materials;
- grouping and tracking;
- the role of the counselors;
- environmental concerns and ecological studies;

- curriculum planning, particularly with regard to drug abuse and sex education;
- teacher/student relationships;
- racial and ethnic balance;
- student activity programs, including athletic events;
- student involvement in the community;
- school finances;
- voter registration for school elections;
- staggered bus schedules;
- student exchanges between schools;
- student health programs;
- hair regulations for athletes;
- year-round school studies;
- involvement in courses of study;
- credit/no-credit courses;
- 7th period opportunities fair to all:
- the selection of instructional materials;
- setting goals and objectives of education for the district;
- the "role" of the superintendent;
- pupil involvement with drugs and violence;
- how students can recommend initiation of new course offerings; and, perhaps most controversial of all
- teacher evaluation.

There is a bill currently moving through the California legislature that, beginning July 1, 1976, would require each school district governing board maintaining one or more high schools, to include one pupil as an additional,

nonvoting member. The pupil would be granted the right to attend each and every governing board meeting, including executive sessions, except for those sessions involving specified personnel matters of position review, or those in which instructions are being given to designated representatives on specified employer-employee relations matters. The pupil would have the right to receive the same travel allowances as voting members. The bill would also require such school district governing boards to establish a procedure which would allow the pupils of the high school or high schools to choose the nonvoting member.

Many of the directors of the California School Boards Association support this measure in principle, but resist legislation mandating such representation. They believe that the best approach is for governing boards to provide student representation upon their own volition, and to organize the activity in the manner which best suits the recognized needs of the school district. The programs of student representation which are currently in operation range from student advisory boards which advise the board of education, to one or more student representatives who sit with the board members and have the right of discussion but not the right to vote.

In the San Diego Unified School District, for example, high school student body presidents have formed a district-wide council from which a student representative is chosen to sit with the Board for a designated period of time.

The Alhambra Unified School District, in 1971, set up a Student-Board Liaison Committee as a means of: 1) improving and facilitating communication with students; 2) strengthening the democratic processes within the school district; 3) increasing the responsibilities carried by students; 4) expanding opportunities for student participation in decision-making; and 5) involving the students in the making of district policies in an orderly way.

The Student-Board Liaison Committee serves in an advisory relationship to the Board of Education. They meet before each Board meeting and go over the agenda. One member of the student group, the elected chairman, is invited to sit with the Board of Education at its meeting. This student speaks for the student group and is governed by all the rules and regulations applying to regular members. However, the student has no vote and does not sit in executive session.

In addition to meeting with the governing board, many school districts in California have made it possible for students to serve on school district committees and citizen's-staff advisory committees.

It may also be of interest to know that a student is selected annually to sit with the 10-member California State Board of Education. The student representative, or his or her alternate, meets monthly with the Board and exercises all the privileges of a regular Board member except for the right to vote and to attend executive sessions. At the college level, just last week the Board of Regents of the University of California broke with long-standing tradition and voted to establish a seat for a student regent. The student regent will have a vote and will be selected by his peers.

C. NATIONWIDE INVOLVEMENT

In the past several years some California school districts--and I know this is true of school districts in other states as well--have received as many as 1,000 inquiries from other school districts across the nation asking for 1) the reasons for having such programs, and 2) how to organize them to make them productive and meaningful.

The responses to such inquiries almost always indicate that these programs exist "because we honestly believe that students must be participants in education." Most of them say it is working: that interaction is more open;

that students are seeking more realistic answers to their questions; and that students are both being heard and being encouraged to act on their ideas and and convictions.

In the Santa Barbara Unified School District, one of the earliest to have such a program, a study was made several years ago that indicated that over 90% of the youth in that district wanted to be involved in decision-making. Board members are quick to point out, though, that as you provide the opportunity for students to serve, you must at the same time assign responsibility. Certainly there must be realistic and specific guidelines to govern such areas as membership, organization, limitation or breadth of authority and other procedural matters, and these guidelines must be strictly followed. At the same time, attention must be given to insuring true involvement rather than settling for a passive sort of program which exists "only on paper."

In California, and probably in a number of other states, student representation is developing in many different ways. In response to this phenomenon, the California School Boards Association, at last year's annual conference, offered a workshop for all students serving as representatives with local boards of education.

In preparing for this meeting, I asked some of the presidents of California school boards which have student representatives for their reactions. In almost every instance they sang the praises of student representation in words such as: "We know it is working for us." "Students know we care about them and their ideas." "We need the direct communication we receive." "There is no better way to teach citizenship than through involvement." "We now have a new view of student needs." "Valuable input has been received on policies affecting them." "Periodic reports back to the student body help to gain more active interest from other students." "They keep us informed of student interests and activities."

When I am asked to state my own feelings about student involvement in civic matters such as serving with school boards, I can only reply that "I know of no better step to learning than to be a part of doing." No classroom lecture, term report, laboratory session, field trip, or any other learning experience you may name, can provide the "know-how" that comes with involvement. Both boards and students benefit when school boards provide for such involvement. The board will be blessed by receiving another significant point of view, with new and varied insights into common problems, and the students will profit by becoming better informed and more concerned citizens of their schools and of their communities.